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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet is intended to assist the consumer in making informed decisions when choosing between distance learning programs. Distance education and distance learners are defined. Included is advice on beginning a program search; choosing a school; accreditation; evaluating quality of electronically offered programs; evaluate non-accredited schools; choosing the appropriate technological delivery; and making a decision. Lists of six published guides, five pertinent Web sites, and six higher education regional accrediting boards follow. The pamphlet includes an insert containing: (1) "Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs." These Principles are the product of a Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications Project, "Balancing Quality and Access: Reducing State Policy Barriers to Electronically Delivered Higher Education Programs." The Principles include curriculum and instruction; institutional context and commitment; evaluation and assessment; and a list of relevant WICHE publications, with price and ordering information. (DLS)

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distance education: a consumer's guide

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distance education:

a consumer's guide

What distance learners need to know



WIAHE

What is distance education?

Distance education is instruction that occurs when the instructor and student are separated by distance or time, or both. A wide array of technologies are currently used to link the instructor and student. Courses are offered via videotape, broadcast television, ITFS (instructional television fixed service), microwave, satellite, interactive video, audio tapes, audioconferencing, CD-ROM, and, increasingly, computer networking—including e-mail, the Internet, and its World Wide Web.

Recent advances in telecommunication technologies have radically altered the world of education, greatly increasing the choices and opportunities for consumers. Today, there are about 5 million distance learners in the U.S.

But if you are considering studying at a distance via technology, you must make informed decisions. Some programs and courses that are offered are simply money-making schemes. It is your responsibility as a consumer to educate yourself about distance education. You need to be able to tell strong programs from weak ones and to identify those that would best meet your needs.

Who are distance learners?

Distance learners are people who, because of time, geographic, or other constraints, choose not to attend a traditional classroom. Financial considerations, family obligations, or work requirements may point to distance education as an appropriate way to meet their educational goals.

Distance learners come from a wide variety of backgrounds, and are of all ages. They turn to distance education largely for convenience. They are highly motivated to succeed and are disciplined enough to incorporate study time into their busy daily lives.

Where do I begin?

First of all, determine if distance education is for you:

- Are you serious, self-motivated and disciplined?
- Do you believe you can adapt to a new learning environment?

If so, you may greatly benefit from distance education.

Next, answer the following questions before you go any further. Your answers have different implications for how you proceed.

- Do you need to update your education for advancement or to stay current in your job or career?

- Are you interested in a new line of work?
- Are you planning a career that requires certification or licensure?
- At some point, are you likely to want to transfer your credits to a traditional college or university?

How do I choose a school?

After deciding on your educational and career goals, decide what skills, programs, or degree would help you advance toward those goals. Then identify some schools or colleges that seem to offer programs to help you reach these goals. Distance learning technologies assure you that geographical location need not be a factor in your choice.

You have a great many options. A number of reputable guides, directories, and on-line resources are available to help you choose which program and institution might be best for you. (See the end of this brochure for a list of these resources.)

How do I evaluate quality?

This is one of the most important steps in a distant learner's process of choosing a school. The best way to evaluate the quality of a school is to make sure it is an **accredited** institution.

What is accreditation?

Accreditation is a voluntary process in which educational institutions submit their programs and credentials to regional evaluating organizations. These groups' approval guarantees that certain minimum standards are met by all accredited institutions. It is important to ask not only if an institution is accredited but also what group granted the accreditation. Educational institutions should be accredited or in the process of seeking accreditation by a regional accrediting association (see list at end of the brochure). Private or industry providers should be recognized for college credit or certification as a result of an evaluation by ACE/PONSI, the Program on Noncollegiate Sponsored Instruction.

Even if a school is accredited, how can I make sure that its electronically offered programs are of high quality?

With the profound changes taking place in learning in our society today, no standards have been set for electronically offered academic degree and certificate programs. To address this problem, the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications developed some **Principles of Good Practice** for these types of programs. (A copy of the Principles can be found in the pocket in the back cover.)

These Principles are important to you as a consumer because they suggest some questions that you should ask. Be sure that you have been given enough information to answer these questions. If not, get more information about any programs and institutions in which you are considering an investment of your time and money.

- Are the requirements for the electronically offered degree or certificate program clear?
- Will I have frequent opportunities to interact with my instructors?
- How will I get library materials and books?
- Has the program provided me with clear, complete, and timely information on the curriculum?

- Can I get additional information about the program's educational effectiveness, including assessments of student learning outcomes and student retention?
- If I enroll, how will I get support services, such as advising?
- Do I have access to all technologies and skills required to complete this program?
- Can I register from a distance?
- Can I get financial aid?
- Does the institution provide assurance that, if I begin a program and work steadily toward graduation, the program will continue to be offered for a sufficient period to enable me to complete all degree requirements?

How do I evaluate a program from a school that is not accredited?

First, ask the institution *why* it is not accredited. Apply the same **Principles of Good Practice** questions to unaccredited institutions. In addition, here are some other ways to evaluate the quality of an institution that is not accredited:

- Contact the State Department of Education and ask about the school's reputation.

- If possible, contact alumni of the school and program you are considering.
- If your goals include licensing or certification, contact the appropriate agencies and question them about the institution, asking if the courses and program offered are acceptable and meet their requirements.
- Contact the Better Business Bureau and ask about the school's record.
- Review the school's reputation in the many directories on distance education.
- Visit the school.
- Check with people in the field in which you plan to work and ask their opinions of that institution.
- Ask the institution you are considering:
How long has the school been established?
How many students are currently enrolled?
How many degrees were awarded last year?

Finally, use your common sense. If something seems too good to be true, it probably is.

What is the best technology to use?

There are a number of modes of technological delivery. The appropriate technology depends on the course and on individual learners' access. You need to evaluate your educational goals and then decide which technology can best help you reach those goals.

There are some practical matters when deciding on which technology to use. Some technologies, such as interactive video conferencing, are not available in most homes, so students must have easy access to a site that is equipped with this technology. Other courses may require that you have access to the Internet and electronic mail capability.

Try and match the technology with your preferred learning style. One-way video may be frustrating if you prefer interactive learning. On-line courses require good reading and writing skills; if you are weak in these areas, this style of learning may not be for you. Evaluate your own strengths, weaknesses, and interests before deciding.

Making a decision

You will spend a lot of time and money earning a degree. Invest the time it takes to identify your needs and find a course of study and reliable institution to help you meet those needs.

**For More Information:
Some Published Guides**

Bear, John. *Bear's Guide to Degrees Nontraditionally*.
Berkeley, California: Ten Speed Press, 1996.

Burgess, William E. *The Oryx Guide to Distance Learning*. Phoenix, Arizona: Oryx Press, 1994.

Dixon, Pam. *Virtual College*. Princeton, New Jersey:
Peterson's Guides, 1996.

The Electronic University: A Guide to Distance-Learning Programs. Princeton, New Jersey: Peterson's Guides, 1993.

Sullivan, Eugene. *The Adult Learner's Guide to Alternative and External Degree Programs*. Phoenix, Arizona:
Oryx Press, 1993.

Thorson, Marcie Kisner. *Campus-Free College Degrees: Thorson's Guides to Accredited Distance Learning Programs*. Tulsa, Oklahoma: Thorson Guides, 1996.

On the Internet

Distance Education Clearinghouse

<http://www.uwex.edu/disted/home.html>

Distance Education General Resources

<http://nova.umuc.edu/~erubin/de-gen.html>

Distance Education Resource Page

[http://www.ola.bc.ca/ola/library/
inetresources/distedlinks.html](http://www.ola.bc.ca/ola/library/inetresources/distedlinks.html)

Distance Learning Resources

<http://tenb.mta.ca/teledds.html>

Dr. E's Eclectic Compendium of Electronic Resources for Adult/Distance Education

<http://www.oak-ridge.com/ierdrep1.html>

Higher Education Regional Accrediting Bodies

- Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools
- New England Association of Schools and Colleges
- North Central Association of Colleges and Schools
- Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges
- Southern Association of Schools and Colleges
- Western Association of Schools and Colleges
(Senior and Junior Commissions)

Preamble

These Principles are the product of a Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications project, *Balancing Quality and Access: Reducing State Policy Barriers to Electronically Delivered Higher Education Programs*. The three-year project, supported by the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, is designed to foster an interstate environment that encourages the electronic provision of quality higher education programs across state lines. The Principles have been developed by a group representing the Western states' higher education regulating agencies, higher education institutions, and the regional accrediting community.

Recognizing that the context for learning in our society is undergoing profound changes, those charged with developing the Principles have tried not to tie them to or compare them to traditional campus structures. The Principles are also designed to be sufficiently flexible that institutions offering a range of programs—from graduate degrees to certificates—will find them useful.

Several assumptions form the basis for these Principles:

- The electronically offered program is provided by or through an institution that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting body.
- The institution's programs holding specialized accreditation meet the same requirements when offered electronically.
- The "institution" may be a traditional higher education institution, a consortium of such institutions, or another type of organization or entity.
- These Principles address programs rather than individual courses.
- It is the institution's responsibility to review educational programs it provides via technology in terms of its own internally applied definitions of these Principles.

The Principles

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

- Each program of study results in learning outcomes appropriate to the rigor and breadth of the degree or certificate awarded.
- An electronically offered degree or certificate program is coherent and complete.
- The program provides for appropriate real-time or delayed interaction between faculty and students and among students.
- Qualified faculty provide appropriate oversight of the program electronically offered.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT AND COMMITMENT

Role and Mission

- The program is consistent with the institution's role and mission.
- Review and approval processes ensure the appropriateness of the technology being used to meet the program's objectives.

Faculty Support

- The program provides faculty support services specifically related to teaching via an electronic system.
- The program provides training for faculty who teach via the use of technology.

Resources for Learning

- The program ensures that appropriate learning resources are available to students.

Students and Student Services

- The program provides students with clear, complete, and timely information on the curriculum, course and degree requirements, nature of faculty/student interaction, assumptions about technological competence and skills, technical equipment requirements, availability of academic support services and financial aid resources, and costs and payment policies.

- Enrolled students have reasonable and adequate access to the range of student services appropriate to support their learning.
- Accepted students have the background, knowledge, and technical skills needed to undertake the program.
- Advertising, recruiting, and admissions materials clearly and accurately represent the program and the services available.

Commitment to Support

- Policies for faculty evaluation include appropriate consideration of teaching and scholarly activities related to electronically offered programs.
- The institution demonstrates a commitment to ongoing support, both financial and technical, and to continuation of the program for a period sufficient to enable students to complete a degree/certificate.

EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT

- The institution evaluates the program's educational effectiveness, including assessments of student learning outcomes, student retention, and student and faculty satisfaction. Students have access to such program evaluation data.
- The institution provides for assessment and documentation of student achievement in each course and at completion of the program.

Related Publications

Distance Education: A Planner's Casebook (2A283), \$10 members/\$15 non-members

Lessons on Accommodations for Colleges and Rural High Schools Linking Electronically (2A281), \$18.00 members/\$25.00 non-members

When Distance Education Crosses State Boundaries: Western States' Policies 1995 (2A260), free to members/\$5.00 non-members

New Pathways to a Degree: Technology Opens the College (2A247), \$17 members/\$22 non-members

Seven Technology Stories: New Pathways to a Degree (2A246), \$13 members/\$18 non-members

Telehealth 1996: Telemedicine, Distance Education, and Informatics for Rural Health Care (2A242), \$10 members and non-members

Order from WICHE Publications,
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principles of good practice

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